



**YOUNG VOICES, NEW VISIONS:**  
**The Power of Youth  
to Improve Communities**



## COMMUNITY LEADERS—

- Is your local government struggling with more demands and fewer resources?
- Are you building the community your residents want?
- Is there a tug-of-war between economic issues, special populations and neighborhood interests?
- Will your young people become productive members of your workforce and leaders of your community?

Public officials considering their locality's future wrestle with these questions, while nationwide surveys suggest they tend to overlook one of the most important resources for community problem-solving: their own young people.

Nationally, young people are disproportionately involved in and affected by the problems that beset communities—drugs, violence, poor education, and lack of jobs. They must be part of the solution and engaging them in problem solving will produce better results.

# The Benefits and Challenges of Youth Civic Engagement

**H**ampton, Virginia's award-winning model for Youth Civic Engagement (YCE) acknowledges that young people have a real stake in improving the places in which they live, learn, play and work. Youth Civic Engagement provides meaningful opportunities for young people to serve others; to influence decisions; and to gain leadership and work experience. The City of Hampton leads *with* youth, engaging them in local government, schools, and the community. The process began in the early 1990s, and it's yielded rich results. In addition to radically changing the way important decisions are made regarding youth, the city has saved money, reduced juvenile crime, and improved services.

Research\* suggests that young people in civic engagement programs are more likely to:

- be involved in school
  - graduate
  - hold more positive civic attitudes
  - avoid risky behaviors.
- As adults they tend to:
- have better work ethics
  - volunteer
  - vote
  - have more socially responsible attitudes.

**"Hampton provides the most ambitious case to date to institutionalize youth civic engagement across the city... "**

Carmen Sirianni,  
BRANDEIS UNIVERSITY

Yet a recent survey of more than 500 municipal leaders on the subject of "Strengthening Families In America's Cities," found that 41% rate their communities as less-than-adequate in meeting young people's needs.\*\*

Although they have a strong desire for social action, young people may not know where to begin community problem solving. And community leaders don't know how to begin involving youth, as recruiting and working with them requires non-traditional methods.

Attitudes are also an obstacle. Some adults want to "fix" young people. Some may think teens will be bored or unruly. Actually, young people tend to be inclusive, and most have a passion for contributing.

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*With its 2005 selection for the Innovations In American Government Award, Hampton's Youth Civic Engagement model can assist communities across the country in putting into practice a fundamental principle of democracy; people impacted by decisions should have a voice in those decisions.*

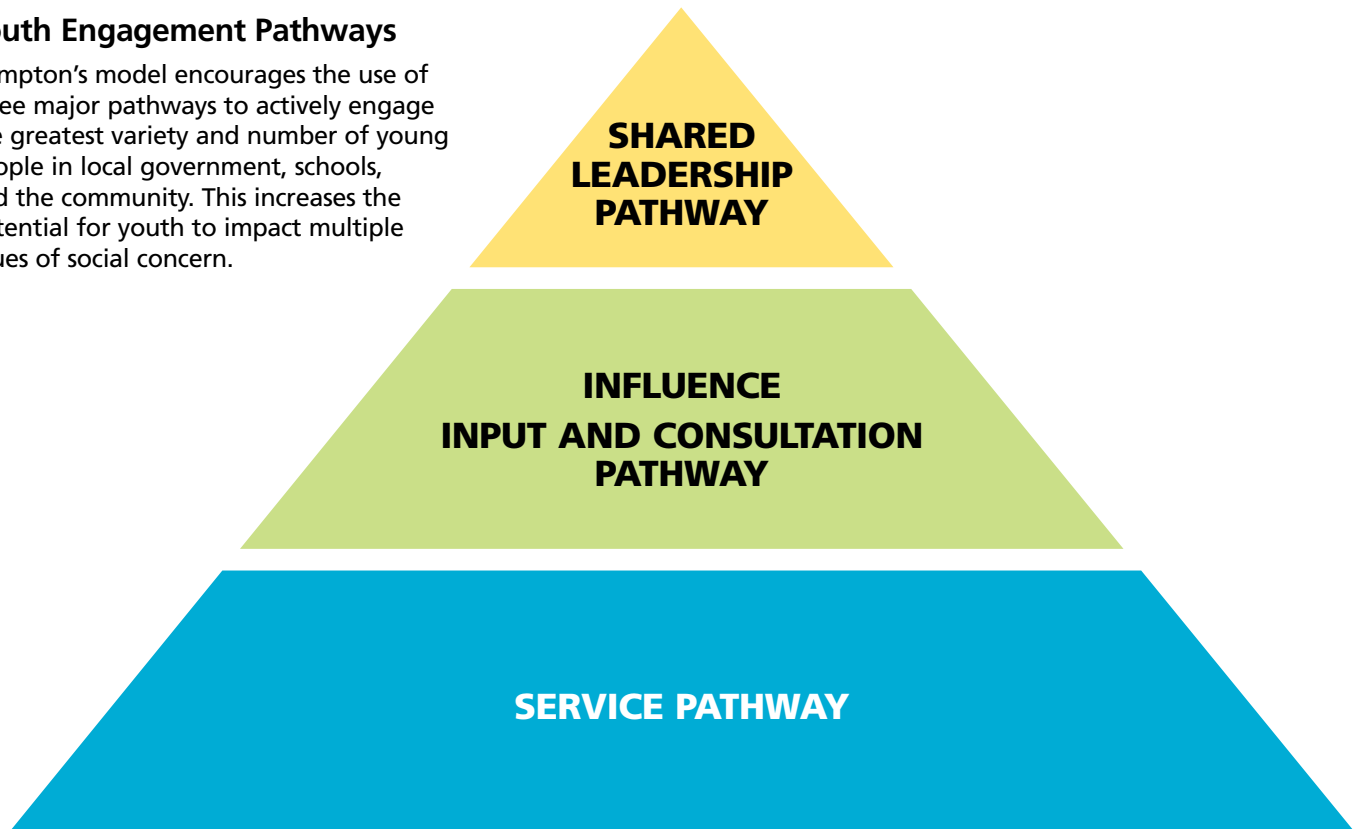
\*Examples: The Forum For Youth Investment and Center of Excellence for Youth Engagement.

\*\*conducted by the National League of Cities.

# A Best Practice: Three Pathways— How It Works In Hampton. How It Can Work For You.

## Youth Engagement Pathways

Hampton's model encourages the use of three major pathways to actively engage the greatest variety and number of young people in local government, schools, and the community. This increases the potential for youth to impact multiple issues of social concern.



### ● SERVICE

Short-term, meaningful volunteer opportunities introduce civic engagement to a broad range of youth.

In just one Hampton example, young people have been active in environmental services, helping to restore the Virginia oyster whose population is 2% of what it was less than a century ago. They have grown oysters in home-made floating cages; cleaned the temporary habitats; and then after a year, harvested the young adult oysters, dropping them overboard onto a newly-built porcelain reef.

### ● INFLUENCE

With training, young people can participate in a variety of advisory roles that provide valuable input.

Hampton youth are trained to gather opinion, deliberate options, and reach consensus on recommendations. When teens joined a local neighborhood planning process, they dramatically shifted the group's direction of strategic investments. Their input that a youth-focused facility proposed by adults would go under-utilized ultimately saved the city over \$3 million.

### ● SHARED LEADERSHIP

Youth serve in positions of authority and as voting members on city boards and committees where they help to create policy.

As part of their research for the city's Community Plan, Hampton Youth Planners uncovered a dearth of teen-focused activities. Following a series of successful proposals to city council, young people are now planning and designing their own \$2.5 million Teen Center.

## Putting the Model to Work: Youth & Bikes

For any issue young people care about, there are countless ways to engage them that create real benefit to the community. For almost any example, a community can create possibilities in all three engagement pathways.

For instance, suppose a city is facing a challenge with bicycle-related injuries...

- As a service-learning activity, young people spend a Saturday morning teaching bicycle safety to children at a bike rodeo.
- To influence change, they advise city planners on dangerous intersections or new bike route designs.
- To share leadership, youth planners research, write, and propose a new bicycle ordinance for the city.





*YCE taps the innate passion of young people to make their community a better place for everyone. Volunteering reinforces their stake in their community.*



*It is important to create or designate a city department as 'champion' for youth and a catalyst for change—guided by a strong plan created by youth, community members and city staff.*



*Having a voice empowers young people to build confidence, trust, and the knowledge that they can make a difference. Adults are reminded of the power and potential of youth.*

## YCE Steps for Adults & Local Government

Successful youth civic engagement doesn't happen overnight. This innovative approach requires preparation, perhaps a mindset change, collaboration, a sustained strategy, and a community-wide commitment to youth development. There are several steps that parallel the YCE pyramid.

● **Acknowledge and engage youth as stakeholders.** Become a champion for youth. Bring together people who recognize youth as a resource and build a coalition. Find skilled youth development professionals who can recruit and train youth and adults. Prepare your workforce for youth/adult partnerships by cultivating respect for diversity of every kind. Identify productive work, appropriate tasks, and a schedule to accommodate the daily rhythms and pressures of young people's lives. Then offer youth challenging projects that are of consequence to the life of the city, not just to them as an interest group.

In Hampton, YCE partnerships work with schools and youth organizations to help create a youth-friendly mindset and to creatively recruit the over 40% of the city's youth who volunteer annually. Young people create projects to tackle problems ranging from neighborhood blight to voter apathy.

*"Hampton, Virginia is a place where young people have become integral to city government, where they are in demand and demanding change."*

Shep Zeldin,  
University of Wisconsin

● **Create opportunities to influence decisions.** Consult young people—seek and value their insights. When local government shifts from the role of regulator and provider to resources broker, YCE becomes a comprehensive approach that builds healthy families, neighborhoods, and businesses. As they develop skills, confidence and awareness, young people are empowered to offer expertise from their social and cultural experiences.

In Hampton, focus groups are established to seek input of young people when city officials face youth-related concerns. Young people routinely advise the Superintendent of Schools, each high school principal, and the Parks and Recreation Director. Their recommendations have created change in issues as diverse as the school division's cell phone policy to city budget allocations.



*Hampton Youth Commission hosts a youth forum for city council election candidates. In 15 years, these youth will set policy as city officials. YCE is an early investment.*

● **Share leadership.** Appoint them to boards and committees. Make sure youth are trained for their new role and the adults are prepared to include them. Hire them! Set mutual accountability, play a supportive role, and let young people take initiative and tackle issues on their own.

In Hampton, the City Planning Department became a YCE partner, bringing aboard teens as paid staff—responsible for their own section of the Community Plan. The Youth Commission, working with the Hampton Coalition for Youth, distributes \$40,000 in grants each year to youth initiatives. Four local government boards and commissions have youth members.

Improving communities is the ultimate goal of youth civic engagement. When they are encouraged to participate and share in a community's decision-making, young people become full citizens, and having a place at the table will produce a better community. When civic democracy is woven throughout the fabric of government and society, a tightly knit community that engages youth is better able to tackle the complex challenges of the 21st century. Successful youth civic engagement doesn't happen overnight, but it can begin today—with you. Begin to make that investment now and watch it pay off.



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To obtain additional pamphlets in this series  
covering more specific topics of

Youth Civic Engagement and  
Creating a Youth-Friendly City,  
email [foryouth@hampton.gov](mailto:foryouth@hampton.gov).



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